One of the central themes in Louise Erdrich's works is the role of religious and spiritual beliefs in shaping one's identity. Early in 1994, Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North Dakota near the Canadian border, completed a quartet of novels on selected Native American families in North Dakota. Her four works—LOVE MEDICINE (1984), THE BEET QUEEN (1986), TRACKS (1988) and THE BINGO PALACE (1994)—cover the struggles of these families on the reservation and in the nearby small town Argus. All four novels show the influence of the Catholic Church on traditional Ojibwa beliefs. But it is in TRACKS that she recounts the most violent clash between the two religions and the detrimental effects of forced assimilation and religious conversion through the rivalry between the two Anishinabeg (Chippewa) women Fleur Pillager, a shaman with supernatural powers, and her acquaintance Pauline Puyat, who invents a sadistic form of Catholicism. Although the lives of these two women are intertwined, they are by no means alike. Fleur upholds the traditions of her ancestors and attempts to save their land from the rapid advance of white civilization, whereas Pauline enters a cloister, denies her Native American heritage, and brings death and destruction to the reservation.

Pauline is the sole survivor of the Puyats, a quiet family of mixed descent. Due to her mother's influence, who "showed her half-white," and the fact that her skin color is lighter than that of her sisters, Pauline has always admired the white race. She dismisses the Anishinabeg on the reservation as backwards and, unlike the rest of her kin, takes great pride in her French Canadian heritage. After her mother's death, Pauline dissociates herself from her family by speaking primarily English, suggesting that her father build an outhouse, and refusing to be taught traditional arts such as beading and curing leather. Instead, she demands to be sent to the nuns in Argus to learn lace-making.

Once in Argus, Pauline must work in her aunt's butcher shop, which to her mind is as offensive as curing leather. Pauline conscientiously suppresses all memories of her family, as her ultimate goal is to assimilate into the white community. However, this attempt fails, as the white girls in Argus either ridicule or ignore her, and she cannot return to her family on the reservation either, for an epidemic has claimed their lives.

Even as a child Fleur demonstrated that she would never completely embrace Christianity. She is one of the last two survivors of the Pillagers who dwelt in the dense, spirit-inhabited woods near lake Matchimanito, home of the powerful underwater manito Misshepeshu. According to legend, Fleur's ancestor Old Man Pillager summoned Misshepeshu to inhabit the lake's deep waters, and the spirit became the family's guardian, granting them medicinal powers, influencing the abundance of game, and protecting those who fell in its waters. For example, when Fleur drowned as a child and later on as a 15-year-old adolescent she cursed the men who had rescued her, and they died mysteriously soon thereafter as if the underwater manito claimed their lives instead of Fleur's. It is no coincidence that the three men who died were employed by the lumber company, for Fleur is the channel through which Misshepeshu protects the Pillager land.

Fleur's adherence to Ojibwa customs is not solely due to her relationship with Misshepeshu, as she was guided by role models who heartily embraced traditional customs. Her mother Ogimaakwe demonstrated the importance of honoring one's heritage by retaining her given name instead of adopting one of Christian origin. After Fleur's family fell to the epidemic, the shaman Nanapush assumes the role of her next teacher, and she regards him
lovingly as a father. At the age of 17, she demonstrates her adherence to traditional values by returning to her family's four allotments on the shores of Matchimanito to protect the land from surveyors.

Whereas Pauline leaves the reservation to become assimilated into the white community, Fleur comes to Argus to raise the allotment fees for her family's land. Because Fleur's stunning physical beauty readily attracts men—even white men—Pauline immediately considers her companion a rival, and she refrains from assisting Fleur as the three butcher shop assistants—Lily, Tor, and Dutch James—rape her in retaliation for losing a high-stakes poker game. Soon thereafter Pauline gains revenge on the three men by lowering the latch on the meat locker in which they seek shelter during a tornado, thereby causing their death by freezing. However, this action merely magnifies Pauline's guilt, for she murders to soothe a troubled conscience, whereas Fleur, through Misshepeshu, kills three men to save tribal land.

In comparison to Fleur, Pauline does not return to the reservation to reestablish ties with the community, but rather to escape the recurring nightmares of her vengeance-seeking victims. She selects the family of the Catholic mixed-blood Bernadette Morrissey to inquire for lodging, for she admires their material wealth, civilized manners and level of education. To arouse Bernadette's pity and be offered refuge, Pauline fabricates lies about her relatives in Argus, saying that she was physically and mentally abused, thereby estranging herself further from her only remaining family. Whereas Nanapush teaches Fleur the traditional ways, Bernadette instructs Pauline in ways of white civilization: reading, writing, arithmetic, and modern medicine.

Pauline's inability to escape her nightmares by traditional remedies, such as the dreamcatcher made by Moses Pillager, Fleur's distant cousin, and her fear of eternal damnation because of the butchers' deaths indicate that she does not subscribe to Ojibwa religion, for it does not profess punishment in the afterlife. Conventional Catholic repentance does not deliver Pauline from her nightmares either, but rather the death of Mary Pepewas, one of Bernadette's patients. Instead of feeling sorrow upon the death of her former schoolmate, Pauline is gripped by intense fascination and overwhelming joy, and she considers her companions "stupid and small" as they cannot perceive the rapture death brings.

Pauline's inability to experience dreams at all after this incident indicates her estrangement from traditional spirituality, which states that the manito lend their aid through dreams, and her lack of concern over the deceased persons' souls in the afterworld indicates that she does not hold true Catholic beliefs either. Although she relinquishes Ojibwa customs, Pauline does not adopt mainstream Catholicism, but rather invents her own version under which she assumes the role of the "crow of the reservation," inviting death into others' houses, handling the cold skin of the deceased, and then passing death onto the living by touching them after dressing the dead.

Pauline, as a harbinger of death, is unable to assist the difficult birth of Fleur's daughter Lulu: as Nanapush relates, "she was useless—good at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them to life, afraid of life in fact, afraid of birth, afraid of Fleur Pillager." Her only act is to shoot an intoxicated female bear which had wandered into the birth house, as if summoned by Fleur's screams of pain, and which fills Fleur with such apprehension that she suddenly has the strength to deliver her child.

This incident is not a mere coincidence, for the bear was most likely a "spirit bear"—it left no tracks when it fled. According to Ojibwa ontology and the concept of "soul dualism," each person possesses two souls which can metamorphize into other animate objects as they travel. The "stationary soul" resides in the heart and provides cognitive powers, emotions and the ability to act. It can leave the body for a short time, but a long separation causes sickness and even death. The "traveling soul" dwells in the brain and exists separately from the body. It travels outside the person during sleep and acts as the "eyes" for the stationary soul. For example, shamans with unusually great powers, such as Fleur, can metamorphize into bears to perform their magic, and many legends about these so-called "bearwalkers" exist:

Several of our people have informed me that they have seen and heard witches in the shape of these animals, especially the bear and the fox. They say that when a witch in the shape of a bear is being chased, all at once she will run round a tree or a hill, so as to be lost sight of for a time by her pursuers; and then, instead of seeing a bear, they behold an old woman walking quietly along, or digging up roots, and looking as innocent as a lamb.

Because the Pillager's clan marker consists of four crosshatched bears and a marten, one can conclude that
Fleur's traveling soul transforms into a bear to lend her stationary soul the necessary strength. The ability to metamorphize does not come from within the shamans themselves, but is lent by a Manitou: in Fleur's case, Misshepeshu.10

Although Pauline informs Fleur that she is entering the convent because she has no family or friends and because she must escape Napoleon Morrissey's sexual advances, the true reason lies in her continuing envy of Fleur, which increases after Fleur's lover Eli ignores her sexual advances. Moreover, just as in Argus, Pauline feels like an outcast, for Fleur and her family treat her as a white person and address her mostly in English. Thus, Pauline's ultimate goal is to assert dominance over Fleur. As a member of the reservation community, Pauline is inferior to Fleur, but as a member of the cloister she belongs to the mainstream Christian community which repeatedly dispossesses the Anishinabeg.

Once Pauline enters the Mission, her disapproval of the "primitive" Anishinabeg turns to outright hatred, revealed in her repeated attempts to abort her child because its drunken father Napoleon affronts her "civilized" ways. Moreover, Pauline had already "betrothed herself to God." (131) Bearing an illegitimate child would have extinguished her chances of becoming a nun by confirming the widespread prejudice that Indian women, due to their dark skin, are exceedingly promiscuous. Pauline deviates from traditional Catholic beliefs which states that abortion constitutes a mortal sin and that a mother, like the Virgin Mary, should lovingly care for her children. Instead, Pauline rejects her child as a "dark thing." (136)

Pauline erases her shame of her mixed-blood heritage by believing that her blood is "wholly white," due to a revelation from God, and that the nuns recognize her pure whiteness. She does not realize that the nuns' acceptance of her, despite the ban on admitting "Indian girls" in the cloister, is due to the fact that she reminds the Superior of "The Little Flower," otherwise known as "Lily of the Mohawks," the Mohawk saint Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680) who is still honored by the Catholic Church as an exemplary female Native American Christian. Just as Pauline, Kateri lost her family to an epidemic, was ridiculed because of her Christian faith, and suffered under drunkards and witchdoctors.11

To become an assimilate Catholic, Pauline strives towards being the most humble, self sacrificing nun on the reservation. Just as the medieval saints, she offers self-inflicted suffering as an atonement for her mortal sins. But she belittles their "predictable" martyrdom and invents methods of penance which exceed even those of the most pious nuns: such as wearing chafing underwear made of potato sacks, walking with her shoes on the wrong feet, and allowing herself to go to the bathroom at sunrise and sunset only. Pauline delights this physical torture and fears her own sexuality as well, unlike Fleur, for she vows to refrain from touching herself at all, even to bathe. One should not conclude that Pauline's self-torture arises from the nuns' influence because they, like Nanapush, are shocked by her masochistic methods.

Pauline's failure to save Fleur's premature child without white medicine demonstrates that she has forgotten even the most common traditional practices. By eradicating traditional customs, the Catholic Church brings death to the Anishinabeg community, for Pauline can only offer to baptize the child after its death. Fleur, however, prevents Pauline from performing the baptism and drinks her own medicinal tea to return to health. In fact, it is only through Fleur's own efforts that the child lives at all, albeit briefly: She cuts the umbilical cord, breathes life into the child, and prepares the necessary medicine. 12

Whereas Pauline relies on Christianity to save the infant's soul, Fleur attempts to save its life by other means. As she sits motionless on her cabin floor, her traveling soul journeys with Pauline on the four-day road to the Ojibwa afterlife where she joins Lily, Tor and Dutch James in a game of poker in which the lives of her children are at stake.13 Fleur loses the first hand and her infant must die, but she succeeds in winning back Lulu's life, who had nearly frozen to death while summoning Eli's mother Margaret to Fleur's cabin.14

As Pauline and Fleur return to the living world, Lily, Tor and Dutch James see Pauline and realize that she is responsible for their deaths—they now await the return of her soul to the afterlife. For this reason, Pauline plans to "lose [herself] in God's tasks" (164) If she becomes Catholic her soul will enter the Christian heaven after death and will not be tormented by her victims for the rest of eternity. She severs all ties with her previous companions and fullheartedly assumes the task of bringing Christianity to the "pagan" Indians and assisting God by "[finding] out the habits and hiding places of His enemy." (137) Pauline now sees the traditionalist Fleur as the greatest obstruction in achieving her goal—Fleur is the anti-Christ, the mediator between the devil Misshepeshu and the Indians on the reservation:

42 Wicazo Sa Review Spring 1995
She was the one who closed the door or swung it open. Between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake, the spirit which they said was neither good nor bad but simply had an appetite. Fleur was the hinge. It was like that with Him, too. Our Lord, who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous who lived in the trees, the bush, or spirits of animals that were hunted so scarce they became discouraged and did not mate. There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it, same as she closed the Argus lockers. Not Fleur Pillager. (139)

Moreover, Pauline sides with the Catholics because she admires the whites’ material affluence and despises the the Native Americans’ failure to cope with their new environment.

Fleur’s miscarriage coincides with the steady advance of white civilization and the dwindling of her powers: the money for her family’s allotments has been spent; her dreams fail to provide food during the harsh winter, and her family must rely on government commodities to survive. She sinks into a deep depression, claiming full responsibility for the reservation’s imminent destruction and, in her pride, forgets that her supernatural powers do not come from within herself, but are merely lent to her by Misshepeshu, as Nanapush relates:

Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive. As soon as you rely on the possession it is gone. Forget that it ever existed, and it returns. I never made the mistake of thinking that I owned my own strength, that was my secret. And so I never was alone in my failures. I was never to blame entirely when all was lost, when my desperate cures had no effect on the suffering of those I loved. For who can blame a man waiting, the doors open, the windows open, food offered, arms stretched wide? Who can blame him if the visitor does not arrive? (177)

Fleur’s failing spiritual health is restored by traditional means: namely, a healing ceremony conducted by Nanapush which centers on a sweat lodge containing a drum of water over a fire. The drum has a two-fold purpose: It attracts troubles and drowns them, and cooks a piece of meat which the healer lifts out and hands to the ailing person. In this case, the “trouble” which the water attracts is Pauline who, like a scavenger, has come to claim Fleur. Like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, Pauline believes that God has chosen her to prove his superiority over the heathen gods from whom Fleur’s powers are derived, by showing that she, unlike Nanapush, needs no herbal paste provided by the Manitou to protect her arms from the boiling water, only her steadfast faith in Christ. Pauline is no modern-day Elijah, however, as her Christian faith alone proves insufficient and her arms are seared by the scalding water.

Because of this humiliation, Pauline’s desire to defeat Fleur becomes increasingly urgent. After initially believing that God had abandoned her because of her insignificance, she envisions the devil challenging her to meet “in the desert.” (193) Pauline thus believes that her task is to assume Christ’s place as God’s servant as he is powerless against Misshepeshu, who is stronger than the devil of biblical lore:

Christ was weak, I saw now, a tame newcomer in this country that has its own devils in the waters of boiling-over kettles. [...] I knew God had no foothold or sway in this land, or no mercy for the just, or that perhaps, for all my suffering and faith, I was still insignificant. Which seemed impossible. I knew there never was a martyr like me. (192)

Christ had turned His face from me for other reasons than my insignificance. Christ had hidden out of frailty, overcome by the glitter of copper scales, appalled at the creature’s unwinding length and luxury. New devils require new Gods. (195)

Just as Christ, who had fasted for forty days and nights in the desert, Pauline plans to fast on Matchimanito and await her final confrontation with Misshepeshu. She does not desire to conquer the devil to save souls, but merely to conquer Fleur and thereby forget her previous life, for her disgust of her “primitive” companions has become sheer and utter loathing:
They could starve and fornicate, expose their young for dogs and crows, worship the bones of animals or the brown liquor in a jar. I would have none of it. I would be chosen, His own, wiped clean of Fleur's cool even hand on my brow, purged of the slide of Napoleon's thighs, of Russell Kashpaw's hot and futile wonder, down in Argus, of the spikes of frost, the snow ferns that grew in Dutch James's hair, of Margaret's unbearable crane stews, of the infant's high wail after which I lay asunder. I would be free of Nanapush, the smooth-tongued artificer. (196)

In the end, only Napoleon approaches Pauline. Her former lover pull her leaking boat to shore, but she mistakes him for Misshepeshu and strangles him with her rosary, murdering him with a sacred object to be used for prayer, not for committing a murder. She admits no compunction though, for she believes that the devil assumed Napoleon's form to tempt her.

As a final step before returning to the nuns, Pauline covers her naked body with mud, decayed leaves, and animal feces in an act of complete self-negation. And yet this self-negation is actually self-glorification, for she rejoices in resembling "Lily of the Mohawks," the most humble person on the reservation:

I was a poor and noble creature now, dressed in earth like Christ, in furs like Moses Pillager, draped in snow or simple air. God would love me better as a lily of the field, though no such flower as I had yet appeared on reservation ground. 16 (203)

She welcomes the pending destruction of the reservation and the passing of traditional ways, ascribing these changes to her victory over Fleur and God's victorious power:

The land will be sold and divided. Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. The place will be haunted, I suppose, but no one will have ears sharp enough to hear the Pillagers' low voices, or the vision clear to see their still shadows. The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened. (204–205)

In the final chapter, Erdrich proves that Catholicism and white civilization have not completely destroyed Ojibwa culture, for Fleur prevails in the end. As the lumberjacks near the Pillager residence, Fleur pays Misshepeshu one final visit to summon his aid—with calm resolution she silently walks into the dark waters, only to be pulled out by her lover Eli. Fleur’s act is not a desperate suicide attempt, for she can only seek revenge on the lumberjacks by drowning in the waters of Matchimanito to return back to life and have someone else die in her stead. And, indeed, some of the lumberjacks die afterwards under mysterious circumstances as Fleur becomes visibly stronger. She visits Moses frequently, steals lumbering equipment, and her patch of pumpkins and squash near the shores of Matchimanito grows profusely—One wonders with what, or with whom, her plants are fertilized.

When Fleur realizes that she cannot stop the destruction of the sacred forest, she conjures a wind which levels the forest surrounding her cabin and renders it useless for the lumber company. Although Fleur is able to save her family's land, she must nevertheless leave the reservation, for most members of the community suspect her of murdering Napoleon. As she departs, she carries her family's belongings and grave markers in a cart made of green oak trees which once surrounded Matchimanito, and in which the spirits of her family are preserved. Fleur's destruction of the forest and her departure do not signal her tragic defeat. The remaining young saplings have the opportunity to grow and restore the land's former beauty, and the power of the Pillager family lives on through Lulu despite Pauline's efforts. This is evident in the simple fact that Nanapush relates the story of Fleur's life to her daughter Lulu. If Fleur had told her own story, just as Pauline had recounted hers, she would have committed self glorification.

Although the authorities of the Catholic church altered the Ojibwa culture by forcing assimilation on the Native Americans, Erdrich saves her most severe criticism for Pauline who renounces her own people and joins the convent due to her jealousy of Fleur. In fact, Erdrich refrains from including incidents of the nuns' renowned cruelty towards their native students in both the church-supported and government schools, perhaps because their mistrust was, in part, dictated by the rules of their order. 17

On the surface, Pauline subscribes to standard Catholic practices, but in reality she has distorted them to create her own sadomasochistic version. Even though
she professes to be Catholic, she is less generous and kind than the "heathen" Fleur. Whereas Pauline sacrifices personal comfort to save her own soul, Fleur denies herself food in order to nourish family and guests during the bleak winter. It is true that Fleur does not regard Pauline highly, but she nevertheless displays hospitality to Pauline, despite the latter's disregard. Thus, Erdrich states that the praiseworthy characters are those who uphold their family's traditions despite the encroachment of white civilization. For in the end, Pauline loses not only the battle against Fleur and her affiliation with the community, but also her sanity; whereas Fleur retains her connection with her heritage, and a true sense of self. ■ ■ ■

END NOTES


2 I also employ the term Anishinaabe and Ojibway (Ojibwa) for Chippewa, following Gerald Visenor who states that Chippewa and Ojibway are modern terms employed by white Americans to designate the tribes, whereas they refer to themselves as Anishinaabe (plural Anishinaabe): Gerald Visenor, The People Named the Chippewa (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1984), pp. 13–14. Chippewa and Ojibway are derived from Ochipewe, the Anishinaabe term for Chippewa Indian: Frederic Baraga, A DICTIONARY OF THE OJIBWAY LANGUAGE (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1992).


5 Nanapush describes the familial relationship between Fleur and Moses as "far cousins, related not so much by blood as by name and chance survival." (33) For information on Ojibwa family clans, see Warren, pp.34–35; Frances Densmore, CHIPPEWA CUSTOMS (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979), pp.9–10.

6 Vecsey, pp. 60–62; Densmore, pp. 78–83.

7 Vecsey, pp. 59–62.


9 Rev. Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby), HISTORY OF THE OJIBWAY INDIANS; WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY (London: A.W. Bennet, 1861), p. 145.

10 Tedlock, p. 163.


13 According to Ojibwa religious beliefs, the two souls of deceased underwent a four-day journey to the afterworld in which they were reunited and assumed their previous physical form. It is possible for a living person's traveling soul to visit the afterworld, but only if the individual is extremely ill, especially comatose, or sufficiently trained. Accounts have been told of living person who have attempted to bring a recently deceased loved one back to the present world. See Vecsey, 63–65.

14 It is a tragic irony that Fleur's child dies despite these efforts, whereas Pauline repeatedly attempted a forced miscarriage, and yet her child lived.

15 See Matt. 4: 1–11.

16 Pauline refers to the biblical message in Matt 6: 28–29: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." HOLY BIBLE, NEW KING JAMES VERSION (National Publishing Co., 1985).